Over the Net

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The fifth issue of *Over the Net* focuses on three topics in three different arenas: Lebanon, Egypt, and the Gulf states. The first topic deals with the natural gas in the Mediterranean, specifically, the dispute between Lebanon and Israel on drilling in Block 9 in the context of complex Lebanese politics, and the Israeli-Egyptian gas agreement. The second topic highlights the efforts of Middle East actors to promote their agenda using new propaganda tools such as 3D video games and animation technologies. The third topic relates to the war in Syria – where there have been a number of important recent developments – and focuses on Arab responses to the confrontation between Israel, Iran, and Syria in early February.

The Gas Trap in the Mediterranean: A Point of Confrontation and a Locus for Local and Regional Cooperation

Israel, Lebanon, and the Dispute over Block 9

In February 2018, the Lebanese government announced it had signed its first offshore oil and gas exploration and production agreements in the Mediterranean. This tender won by a consortium of companies consisting of Total (France), Eni (Italy), and Novatek (Russia). The concession also covers the disputed area, Block 9, located north of the line that divides the economic waters of Israel and Lebanon – a line whose precise location is contested by the two countries. On February 9 the Lebanese government was supposed to give the green light for the first time to the start of drilling in its marine territory. That day Israel's Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman issued a [statement](#) that "international companies would make a grave mistake if they participated in Lebanon's exploratory drilling in territory that belongs to Israel, thereby breaking the accepted rules." Hezbollah, for its part, could not stay out of the fray, and activated its [propaganda machine](#), including the distribution of short videos and fliers all over Lebanon that bore a clear threat to Israel: "Anyone who harms the gas and oil sites in Lebanon's economic waters will have their own sites harmed." The American mediator David Satterfield came to the region in order to seek a compromise.

The discourse on social media in Lebanon sheds some light on this complex issue from the Lebanese angle, and enables us to learn about the background to the current events. The key to understanding the affair lies in the political context. After three and a half years without a president, almost nine years without an elected parliament (since 2008), and almost 12 years without a government budget (the last budget passed by the government was in 2005), Hezbollah achieved the unbelievable, and on October 31, 2016 formed a coalition agreement. According to the agreement, Hezbollah candidate Michel Aoun would be appointed President, and political rival Saad al-Hariri would be appointed Prime Minister and form a temporary government. The first topic that the Hariri government chose to [deal with](#) (before the election law, tax increases, or a government budget) was energy, by passing two laws relating to gas

and oil. These laws allow foreign companies to win tenders to drill in Lebanon's territorial waters in the Mediterranean. In March 2017 the budget was approved, and it was decided that parliamentary elections would take place in May 2018.

Thus about a year before the gas dispute between Israel and Lebanon appeared in the headlines, there was much discussion in Lebanon about the secret behind Hezbollah's success in achieving what all Lebanese politicians had failed to do over the previous decade. The clear conclusion for most participants in the public debate, based on tangible evidence, was that the open coalition agreements that facilitated the formation of the government and selection of the President had a side appendix. This document deals with the dividends to be received by the families (with their numerous branches) of Michel Aoun, Saad al-Hariri, and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, out of the expected profits from the Blocks 4 and 9 gas and oil deals. It was also agreed that the budget would be passed only subject to a salary raise for Members of Parliament and ministers, and this too was dependent on Lebanon's expected revenues from the drilling in Block 9.

The decisive equation that emerges from the debate is: political stability in return for gas and oil revenues. On the one hand, Hezbollah needs political stability and the appearance of a functioning civil government, but on the other hand, it is not interested in bearing the financial burden of supporting Lebanon. Therefore, and since it is not itself dependent on this money (it is supported by Iran), the organization agreed to renounce this income and divide it among all "the corrupt politicians," who as claimed by a known Lebanese activist, "are prepared to sell their mothers" for profit.

This is the source of the urgency shown by the Lebanese government to reach a territorial compromise over Block 9 and avoid any delay in the start of drilling. Without the dividends from the gas, it will be very hard for Hezbollah to form a government and maintain the coalition agreements. The gas is an essential condition for the formation of a functioning government, passage of the budget, and political stability.

Against this background, the question arises why Lebanon refused the draft compromise offered by the American negotiator Satterfield. Apparently Hezbollah does not want to show Israel that Lebanon is keen on reaching a compromise, which would raise immediate suspicions on the Israeli side. Or as voiced on social media: "The number one rule in negotiations: never accept the first offer on the table." Nasrallah wants Israel to be pressured to reach a compromise, because only then will it have an interest in honoring the agreement. He is also careful not to expose the weakness of the present government in Lebanon. Others add – following Hezbollah's narrative efforts and viral campaigns on social media – that if Israel does not agree to sign, Hezbollah could perhaps initiate provocations from the sea that would make the life of the Leviathan field intolerable, and ultimately force Israel to sign a compromise.

In conclusion, the discourse on social media suggests that Lebanon is anxious to reach a compromise with Israel regarding Block 9 because the success of the elections, formation of a government, passage of the budget, tax increases, and politicians' salaries are fully linked to the revenue and dividends from the gas. Israel's interest in a compromise agreement helps Hezbollah both directly and indirectly to set up a government and stabilize the domestic arena in Lebanon. A functioning government will also enable foreign governments to continue sending military and economic aid to Lebanon. On the other hand, Israeli hesitation in signing

the compromise agreement could lead to provocations by Hezbollah with the potential to spread into Israel's territorial waters (based on the sense that if there is a genuine threat to its gas installations, Israel will rush to reach a compromise). Moreover, an examination of the Hezbollah campaign over social media reveals that its target audience includes Israeli gas companies, on the assumption that pressuring them will make them pressure the Israeli government to reach a compromise and avoid endangering their installations.

<u>The Gas Agreement between Israel and Egypt</u>

On February 19, shortly after tension peaked between Israel and Lebanon regarding Block 9, the Israeli Delek Drilling company announced that it had signed two agreements with the Egyptian company Dolphinius to export gas to Egypt. The agreements cover the supply of natural gas from the Leviathan and Tamar fields, worth about $15 billion. Activists on social media in Egypt responded immediately to the announcement from Israel with a variety of reactions.

The most prominent refrain was criticism of the Egyptian establishment. There was anger that Egyptian citizens had to learn about the deal from [their neighbors](#) and not from their own government. Many network users also derided the deal, and could not understand [the logic](#) behind it. Why does a country that exported gas to Israel for over a decade and possesses larger gas reserves than Israel now need to import gas from its neighbor? The Egyptian government did not want to disclose the deal with Israel before the presidential elections in March 2018. (The pipeline supplying gas to Israel after the previous deal in 2005 was blown up over 40 times from 2011-2013.) Nothing was done to explain the deal or prepare the Egyptian public. This behavior created a public impression that the Egyptian government had something to hide, which in turn invited a range of conspiracy theories and opposition to the agreement.

However, other voices stressed what Egypt would gain from the deal. The Egyptian narrative, unlike the Israeli one, states that Egypt will not import gas from Israel because Egypt does not need to. On the contrary, Egypt is "renting" its gas liquefying facilities to Israel so that Israel can export its gas to Europe and utilize the Egyptian facilities. In an interview on February 21, el-Sisi said: "We've scored a goal." The deal with Israel makes Egypt a regional energy center. Later there were some who claimed Egypt was replacing its rival Turkey as a regional energy center.

<u>War Games, Animation, and 3D</u>

"In a world where there are no decisive victories, it is more worthwhile to create a virtual reality than go to war" - a statement not long ago by a leading activist in Lebanon. In recent months two short videos and a video game were disseminated on the social media by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Hezbollah. Until recently, "Hollywood-type" war movies on the network were the exclusive province of the Islamic State (ISIS). The latter has recently dropped out of the picture following the almost complete elimination of its media arm, but meanwhile other players in the Middle East have adopted this method and tools, toward inculcating doctrine,

shaping public opinion, and influencing young audiences – in their own countries, and throughout the region.

This is not the first time that the armies of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Hezbollah have produced propaganda movies simulating wars with one enemy or another. But it is the first time that they have used animation and 3D effects, with the aim of influencing cognition, improving the army's image, and recruiting the younger generation – all making use of social media platforms (primarily YouTube and Twitter). The movies, two of which use animation and all three of which simulate war, do not signal a dramatic political or military occurrence. Moreover, the shelf life of movies produced by states or semi-government organizations is short and necessarily limited. The public understands that the movies and games have a propaganda purpose, so in the best case they create a buzz and momentary conversation, but no more than that. However, they can ignite a widespread reaction on social media, which is worth studying in order to learn about the public mood.

Saudi Invasion of Iran

The first widely discussed movie (distributed in December 2017) was produced by Saudi Arabia through the army's psychological warfare division. It is an animated 3D movie of six minutes that shows Saudi armed forces invading Iran, blowing up the nuclear reactor in Bushehr and Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran, and capturing al-Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani. The climax of the movie is the mass celebration in Azadi Square in Tehran, at which Saudi Arabian flags and posters of the Crown Prince are waved aloft, while in the background Saudi aircraft drop fliers on the crowd saying: "We are looking for peace, we are with you." The central message is that the borders of Iran are no obstacle to Saudi power, which will liberate the Iranian people from the burden of the ayatollah regime.

This Saudi movie gained over one million views, an impressive number. There are five possible reasons for this. First, it was translated from Arabic into several languages, including English, Persian, Japanese, and even Hebrew. Second, the animation simulates war scenes using visual effects and images that are similar to Hollywood productions (the hero is like the character from *The Terminator*). Third, it is easy to identify with the plot. For example, the bad guy is Qasem Soleimani, perhaps the most hated person in Saudi Arabia. Fourth, the plot is short, and – unlike reality – ends with a decisive victory, with Saudi Arabia the good over Iran the bad. The final scene is the "happy ending" of liberating the Iranian people from the ayatollahs and removing the threat to Saudi Arabia and the region. Fifth, this is a 3D production mediated through social networks and accessible to the younger generation in the Kingdom, who currently account for over 60 percent of the population.

Within the Kingdom there has been little criticism of the movie, but the message has been completely internalized: Iran's borders are porous and do not threaten Saudi Arabia's superiority in the air. Most criticism has come from outside the Kingdom. The movie is deemed very unrealistic due to the imaginary events that bear no relation to reality. Moreover, why should Saudi Arabia – which for three years has been unable to defeat the Houthi militias in Yemen - think it could defeat Iran? Criticism in Saudi Arabia has been heard from older generation, who have mocked the use of animation and labeled the movie as superficial propaganda.

<u>Join the Ranks of Hezbollah to Fight and Defend the Holy Places</u>

The second [movie](#), which was distributed by Hezbollah in late February 2018, is actually a promotion for a computer game called "The Holy Defense," in which the player has to fight against opponents of the Syrian regime. In the movie, which lasts 1.25 minutes, a Shiite fighter comes to the Holy Places in Syria, of which the most important is the grave of the holy Zaynab, daughter of Imam Ali. An attack on the rebels and opponents of Assad starts at this site. The central message of the movie is that Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict in Syria is intended above all to protect the Shiite holy sites.

The computer game is aimed at the Lebanese public in general, and the younger generation of Shiites in particular. Its declared purpose is to pay tribute to the victims killed "protecting the homeland" in Syria and Lebanon and their families. Discourse on social media shows clearly that the undeclared [purpose](#) of this war game is to recruit the younger generation to the ranks of Hezbollah and send messages to justify its involvement in the ongoing war in Syria. The war game has benefited from massive [promotion](#) on social networks, traditional media, and even [billboards](#) in the country.

Hezbollah has learned that the way to shape public opinion and promote awareness among the younger generation in Lebanon is through interactive computer games and animation, but demonstrated an archaic approach to marketing the product. It was distributed on [CDs,](#) an older platform, with sales through stores and not online platforms. This limited the number of people who were exposed to the game and purchased it. Hezbollah has thus advanced in terms of production and packaging, while the messages and means of distribution remain unchanged.

<u>Egypt's War on Terror in Sinai</u>

The third [movie](#) was distributed and produced by the Spokesperson's Department of the Egyptian Army and distributed in early February 2018 following the February 7 announcement by the Egyptian army of the start of Operation Sinai 2018, to wipe out terror in the peninsula. Unlike the other two movies, it does not use animation. It shows the movement of troops into Sinai for the fight against terror. The movie lasts about seven minutes and demonstrates the abilities of the ground, air, and sea forces. At the end, soldiers distribute food to Sinai residents. The main message is that Egypt is big, strong, and able to overcome terror in Sinai without anyone's help, while the army can also take care of the population's needs.

The Egyptian propaganda movie was created in an atmosphere critical of the regime and the army. There were online comments that the movie was a direct response to an [article](#) published in the *New York Times* on February 3, which claimed that in the framework of secret cooperation between Israel and Egypt, Israel attacked more than 100 terror targets in Sinai in 2017 by means of drones (UAVs). The subsequent sense in Egypt was that the army was unable to deal with terror in Sinai on its own, and needed Israel's help. The image of an impotent army and the damage to Egypt's sovereignty were very uncomfortable for el-Sisi, who therefore had to embark on a broad operation in Sinai, accompanied by a movie sending a strong, powerful image. Another factor was the Egyptian presidential elections, scheduled for late March 2018. President el-Sisi, who wanted to be elected for a second term, was forced – in view of the severe criticism aimed at him within the country – to market successes to the

public. Some argue that this is el-Sisi's election campaign, where he shows the army's power and his successes in the War on Terror.

In production terms, the movie is old fashioned, with no innovative elements or special effects such as animation and 3D, used by Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah. It even contains parts recycled from old campaigns. Sole responsibility for its distribution lay with the media arm of the Egyptian army, which broadcast the movie continuously in the attempt to drive home its message. Therefore, unlike the Saudi movie and the Hezbollah computer game, it appears that the profile movie of the Egyptian army has not managed to shape the narrative (public opinion) – either in Egypt or outside it.

Responses to the "Day of Battle" with Syria

The current period in Syria is characterized by events and changes on the various fronts, including the Turkish invasion (Operation Olive Branch) of the Afrin area in its struggle against the Kurds; clashes between Russian and Syrian forces, and United States and Kurdish forces at Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria; the start of the campaign (referred to as "Operation Final Solution" on social media) by Syrian and Russian forces to clear the Damascus perimeter (the eastern Ghouta); and the split and reformation among rebel forces in the Idlib region. Added to these was the brief Iranian-Israeli-Syrian clash on February 10, which included the penetration of Israeli air space by an Iranian drone that was intercepted by the Israeli Air Force, an IDF attack on Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria, and the crash of an Israeli F-16 plane in northern Israel following anti-aircraft fire from the Syrian Army. The discourse on the social media in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf following the incident merits attention.

Two main points emerged from the exchanges in Lebanon. The first was the repetition of the well-known image by Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah (in May 2000), that Israel was weaker than a spider web. The Lebanese public followed the news channels in Israel and the analyses by commentators and experts, from which they concluded that the central message was that "Israel is not interested in escalation." This mood was interpreted on the Lebanese side as "Israel's hysteria." Many people on social media could not understand why Israel shoots and then immediately apologizes and tries to contain the situation. The impression formed by the Lebanese public was of Israeli panic.

The second point relates to the question of whether or not the balance between Israel and Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah has changed. On the one hand, as a result of the Israeli debate (as reflected in Israeli TV channels and press to the Lebanese public), it seems that although Israel claims that the balance has changed in its favor, the Lebanese actually interpreted "Israel's fear of escalation to be greater than its willingness and readiness to change the equation." On the other hand, unlike in Israel, the debate in Lebanon indicates that Hezbollah and the Assad regime are indeed changing the rules of the game. Therefore, Israel's freedom to operate in Syrian air space has come to an end, and now any attack on the sovereignty of Syria and Lebanon will receive an immediate response.

The debate in the Gulf states, particularly among Saudis and the UAE, was surprising. The clear majority in the Gulf are keen to see direct conflict between Israel and Iran, "the sooner the better." The winds of war and encouraging calls to Israel dominate the debate in the Gulf,

in the expectation that Israel will escalate the conflict with the Iranian axis. Large sections of the Gulf population believe that only Israel can militarily put an end to Iranian hegemonic ambitions.

Surprising evidence of this came from two Twitter polls conducted by one of the most senior journalists on *al-Jazeera* (an enthusiastic supporter of political Islam and a known hater of Israel), Faisal al-Qasem, which reaches over five million followers. The first survey was conducted that same day, February 10, when he asked "If war broke out today (if, if, if) between Israel and Iran and its militias in Syria, whom would you support?" 23,775 people responded: 56 percent said they would support Israel and 44 percent would support Iran and the militias. In the second survey that day, Faisal questioned which of the parties was perceived as more credible regarding the penetration of the Iranian drone to Israeli territory and the Iranian denial. 7,285 users responded, of whom 73 percent claimed that they believed Israel, and only 27 percent claimed to believe Iran.

Some respondents stressed that their support for Israel in the struggle against Iran is not due to their love of Israel but their hatred of Iran. In the past, it was Saddam Hussein who managed to stop the hegemony and the destructive impact of Iran, while today the perception is that only Israeli military force can repel Iranian influence, and therefore the Gulf is encouraging Israel to take action against Iran.